



Press Statement: November 25th 2013

Evidence that cannabis triggers mental illness is too great to ignore, warns the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland.

Cannabis has been implicated in the origin of depression, psychosis and schizophrenia. Cannabis can lead to anxiety, panic attacks and paranoia. There is also growing evidence that cannabis use damages the developing brain in persons under the age of twenty one. Cannabis use in the longer term is associated with short term memory defects, difficulty with concentration, motivation and difficulty with problem solving.

The College has concerns that legalising the use, sale or supply of cannabis, will increase the amount available in society, and lead to increased use in vulnerable, younger people.

“The risk of schizophrenia is greatly increased in a small subgroup of people who use cannabis”, says Professor Mary Cannon, RCSI, who has conducted extensive research into youth mental health. “Studies have shown increased risk of both schizophrenia and psychosis in general. There have been both retrospective and prospective studies showing an association between cannabis and schizophrenia.”

A number of studies have concluded that cannabis use is part of a constellation of risk factors that increase risk of psychosis generally.

“We know that ongoing use of cannabis prevents a person with schizophrenia from recovering. It has a short term “feel good” factor, and therefore it is attractive to people who already have difficulties. Legalising it will increase the use and make recovery more difficult.” warns Dr. William Flannery, Chair of the College Addictions Faculty.

“The argument that cannabis is less harmful than alcohol has been raised. It is worth noting that this does not imply that cannabis is without harm” says Dr Flannery. *“Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse has found that nearly 1 in 10 who has ever used cannabis will become addicted to it. This rises to 1 in 6 for young people who have ever used cannabis and rises again for daily cannabis users with 1 in 4 and some studies 1 in 2 becoming addicted to it.”*

“As psychiatrists our focus is on treating mental health problems”, Dr Flannery continued, *“From my own experience as an addictions psychiatrist, now more than ever we are battling with ensuring young people with mental health problems avoid alcohol as much as possible. The idea of legalising another substance, which also has a toxic effect on the developing brain, would just add to the problem.”*

The College urges any discussion around legalising cannabis will face up to the realities of the serious mental health problems in our society, particularly among the youth, and the damaging substances which are impacting on recovery from these problems.

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